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*Published in:*  
Social Science Research

*DOI:*  
[10.1016/j.ssresearch.2007.02.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2007.02.005)

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2007

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Poortman, A.-R., & Lyngstad, T. H. (2007). Dissolution risks in first and higher order marital and cohabiting unions. *Social Science Research*, 36(4), 1431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2007.02.005>

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# Dissolution risks in first and higher order marital and cohabiting unions

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Available online 10 April 2007

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## Abstract

More and more people enter multiple unions during their lives, and then they may choose to either cohabit or marry. We examine the implications of this diversity in partnership trajectories by assessing dissolution risks in first and higher order marital and cohabiting unions. We use recent Norwegian survey data that contain complete retrospective union histories. We find that, when selectivity is accounted for, higher-order unions are not less stable than first unions. When dissolution risks for all possible partnership trajectories are compared, we find that former cohabitants who cohabit in a second union are as likely to break up as they were in their first cohabiting union. As soon as they enter marriage in their second unions, however, they do slightly better than first married persons. The previously married experience higher dissolution risks in their second union compared to their first, regardless of their current union type.

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**Keywords:** Cohabitation; Divorce; Marriage; Norway; Partnerships; Random effect; Remarriage; Selectivity; Separation; Union history; Union stability

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## 1. Introduction

Life-long marriage has given way to more diverse partnership trajectories. More and more people enter a union more than once during their lives, and the choice of union

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type is no longer confined to marriage as people often choose to cohabit, particularly the second time around (e.g., Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Kiernan, 2001; Wu and Schimmele, 2005). Contemporary partnership trajectories are diverse as to the type and number of unions formed, and some trajectories may lead people to fare less well in life than others. To date, research on the implications of different partnership trajectories has focused on a comparison of either first and second marriages (i.e., number of unions) or marriage and cohabitation (i.e., type of union). These two lines of research have studied many outcomes, but union stability is for obvious reasons frequently encountered in both research areas (e.g., Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994; Seltzer, 2000; Smock and Manning, 2004); given its multitude of adverse consequences (e.g., Holden and Smock, 1991; Kitson and Morgan, 1990), union dissolution represents one of the most consequential outcomes.

The first line of research dates back to the 1970s (e.g., Cherlin, 1978), and has shown that second marriages are more likely to dissolve than first marriages, although sometimes no difference is found (e.g., Aguirre and Parr, 1982; Booth and Edwards, 1992; Clarke and Wilson, 1994; Martin and Bumpass, 1989). Given the negative impact of prior marriage on the fate of the current and the adverse consequences of divorce, these findings suggest that disadvantages cumulate over the life course as people go on to have multiple marriages. The second line of research has studied differences in union stability between cohabitants and married persons. Cohabiting unions are found to be less stable than marriages (Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989). This also goes for marriages preceded by cohabitation, although some studies suggest that premarital cohabitation no longer leads to higher divorce risks (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Brüderl et al., 1997; Dush et al., 2003; Schoen, 1992; Teachman, 2003). These findings suggest that cohabitants fare less well in life than married persons, fueling debate about whether rising cohabitation and falling marriage rates are to be seen as problematic (Popenoe, 1993; Stacey, 1993; Waite and Gallagher, 2000).

This study ties together the two research lines to gain greater insight into the implications of contemporary diversity in partnership trajectories. Because the first research line has not taken into account cohabiting unions and the second paid no attention to higher order unions, little is known about how union stability varies across complete partnership trajectories. We try to fill this gap by comparing dissolution risks of first, second and higher order marital and cohabiting unions. Our study gives more insight into how (dis)advantages cumulate across the life course as we not only track the fate of the formerly married in their second marriage, but also that of the expanding groups of former cohabitants and those who enter a cohabiting union a second time around. This study may also inform the controversy between advocates of marriage and their opponents as we show whether cohabitants overcome any initial disadvantage by choices made later in life. Studies on premarital cohabitation and marital stability give just part of the answer as they only track cohabitants who stay with their partner. We may understand more when we also study the stability of second and later unions formed by former cohabitants.

We first examine whether higher order unions are more likely to dissolve than first unions to assess whether prior findings on the greater instability of second marriages can be generalized to all unions (i.e., also including cohabiting unions). Second, we calculate a set of dissolution risks that include all possible partnership trajectories. For first unions, we distinguish between marriage and cohabitation. For second unions we make

a distinction on the basis of the type of prior and current union: (a) previously married, currently cohabiting, (b) previously married, currently married, (c) previously cohabiting, currently cohabiting, and (d) previously cohabiting, currently married. A comparison of these dissolution risks shows how formerly cohabiting and married persons fare in a second marriage or cohabiting union.

We use data that trace a person's partnership trajectory over time meaning that we have information about several unions per person. Besides controlling for well-known correlates of union disruption and entry, we can therefore control for selectivity on unmeasured characteristics. It is important to do so because persons who enter a second union or choose to cohabit may be selected on characteristics that go unmeasured in most studies, leading to an overestimation of the effect of prior union experiences on subsequent union stability, particularly for dissolution rates of cohabitations. Data come from Norway and cover cohorts born from 1960 to 1980. Figures on older cohorts show that Norway ranked in the middle of European countries as to the prevalence of cohabitation (Kiernan, 2001). However, Norway may have converged on the other Scandinavian countries. Patterns of cohabitation appear to have changed more rapidly in Norway than elsewhere (Kiernan, 2001, p. 8), and by the end of the 1990s Norway ranked among the top in fertility in cohabitation; more than 40% of all newborns are born to cohabiting mothers (Clarke and Jensen, 2004; Kiernan, 2001; Kravdal, 1997). Cohabitation has thus become an integral part of family life in Norway and cohabitants' legal rights and obligations in some areas have converged on those of married couples (Noack, 2001).

## 2. The relative instability of first and later marital and cohabiting unions

Why would first unions be more stable than later ones? As mentioned, the higher instability of later unions may arise from selectivity: persons in such unions may have certain traits (e.g., progressive attitudes, lack of interpersonal skills) implying a greater propensity to move from one relationship to the other (Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984; Halliday, 1980). Persons who choose to cohabit may be even more selective on such traits than married persons (Smock and Manning, 2004). Because we try to control for such selectivity, differences between first and second unions are likely to represent a causal effect, and can be interpreted in terms of change as people move from first to second unions. There are several reasons to suspect such change.

First, ties to the former relationship may produce greater complexity in higher order unions, which might lead to a higher rate of dissolution than for first unions (Cherlin, 1978). Persons with prior union experiences are confronted with problems unfamiliar to those in first unions, such as conflicts arising from ties to former partners and their family members. Such problems will be even more common among those with children from a prior union, because children make it more likely that relationships with former family members are continued (Cherlin, 1978; Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984).

Second, higher order unions may be less stable because of changing marriage market conditions. When people search for a partner for the second time, they are older and thus confronted with a more restricted pool of eligible mates than the first time around (Dean and Gurak, 1978; Jacobs and Furstenberg, 1986; Gelissen, 2004). Given poorer marriage

market conditions, people may have more difficulties in finding a good match, which in turn may increase the risk of divorce (Dean and Gurak, 1978; Jacobs and Furstenberg, 1986; Gelissen, 2004).

Third, going through the often painful process of breaking up may cause people to be more cautious the next time (Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984). Such greater cautiousness may lead to less commitment to and fewer investments in the second union compared to the first, which in turn results in a higher risk of dissolution. The greater cautiousness of people who start a new relationship may also express itself in a lower threshold to separate; people may prefer to leave rather than to remain in an unhappy relationship after having gone through the process of separation once (Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984, p. 440).

The increase in union instability when entering a second union may depend upon the type of prior union. Even though former cohabitants may have had higher dissolution risks than formerly married people in their first union (e.g., Bumpass and Lu, 2000), it may well be that the rise in dissolution risks will be particularly pronounced among the formerly married. Because of the institutionalized nature of marriage and the long-term commitment it implies, married persons may be better socially integrated than cohabitants (Eggebeen, 2005; Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001). Hence, formerly married people probably have stronger ties to the previous relationship than former cohabitants, leading to more difficulties in dealing with their social relationships in a second union. Formerly married people are also likely to face poorer marriage market opportunities than former cohabitants, because they tend to be older at the time their union dissolves, and because they may be less attractive candidates to others because of the stigma of divorce. Finally, formerly married persons may have become more cautious than former cohabitants. As the choice for marriage signifies a strong commitment (Nock, 1995; Stanley et al., 2004), the emotional impact of divorce may be greater than that of dissolving a cohabiting union, leading to a stronger attitudinal adjustment among the previously married.

The increase in union instability may also depend on the type of union that is chosen the second time. As marriage implies more commitment (Nock, 1995), people's choice to cohabit the second time may indicate that they are indeed cautious of long-term commitment, did not find the right partner yet, or are still not sure of their relationship. If people marry, however, they have (partly) overcome their fear to commit and are probably surer of their relationship. Hence, the increase in union instability is likely to be greater for those who choose to cohabit rather than marry the second time; people may thus compensate for their increased dissolution risk by getting married.

The mechanisms pertaining to the type of prior and second union may interact. For example, the extent to which people may compensate for their elevated dissolution risk in second unions by marrying depends upon how emotionally devastated they were in the first place. Similarly, the higher dissolution risk arising from a low quality match or complex family ties may be hard to compensate for, even by getting married. It is difficult to predict what these interactions add up to, but it may well be that getting married rather than cohabiting in their second union does not reduce the risk of dissolution as much among the formerly married as among former cohabitants.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Data

We use the New Families Survey taken by Statistics Norway in 2003 (Wiecek, 2003). This is a postal survey based on a nationally representative random sample. The gross sample was 10,000 persons and with a response rate of 63.3%, the net sample consists of 2970 men aged 23–47 and 3347 women aged 20–44. Non-response was slightly higher for men than women, but this does not seem to be a serious threat to the representativeness of the sample (Wiecek, 2003). Immigrants, defined as individuals with no Norwegian-born parents, were not sampled due to their markedly different demographic behavior.

The survey includes retrospective information about respondents' partnership trajectories: the occurrence, type and timing of all unions they have had. We also have information about their parental background, their socio-economic characteristics, place of residence, the presence and age of children, allowing us to control for some well-known determinants of union dissolution and entry into cohabitation or marriage. Some of this information was taken from Norwegian administrative registers and linked to the survey data using a unique personal ID number. These registers provide yearly measurements of income, educational activity and attainment, place of residence, and respondents' fertility histories. Register variables have the advantage that they are not plagued with under- or over-reporting as survey questions might be.

Ideally, we would like to have information about current and past partners of the respondent, but, as in most other surveys, this information is not available; the questionnaire would be too extensive when information had to be asked about each partner. Although tracking complete union histories over time has the advantage that we can control for selectivity, the procedure comes at a price in that we cannot control for partners' characteristics. We therefore do not know whether respondents' partners have been in a union before. Previous studies have shown that the largest difference in divorce risks is found between marriages in which both partners are in their first marriage and marriages in which one of the partners is remarried. Divorce risks are not much higher when both partners, rather than only one, are in a second marriage (Aguirre and Parr, 1982; Booth and Edwards, 1992; Clarke and Wilson, 1994). We may therefore underestimate the difference in dissolution risks between first and later unions; respondents in their first union may have a partner who has been in a union before, and respondents in a higher order union may have a partner without such experience.

For our analyses, we selected 5294 individuals who experienced at least one union. In total, these individuals have 6939 union experiences. In Table 1 it can be seen that 1961 (37%) of first unions dissolves, that 1332 individuals enter a union for the second time, and that 426 (32%) of these second unions dissolve. The number of individuals who enter a third or higher order union is relatively small, only 313 persons. As to the type of union, little over half of the respondents (53%) are married in their first union. Direct marriage is rare (about 10%), and is even less likely in second unions (2%). Cohabitation is the most popular type of union chosen the second time around; 64% is cohabiting and 34% cohabits prior to marriage.

Table 1

Union type and dissolution frequency by union order

Union order	Cohabiting	Married after cohabitation	Directly married	Dissolutions
First unions ( $N = 5294$ )				
Percent	47	43	10	37
$N$	2488	2260	546	1961
Second unions ( $N = 1332$ )				
Percent	64	34	2	32
$N$	850	451	31	426
Higher order unions ( $N = 313$ )				
Percent	69	29	2	29
$N$	215	91	7	91

Source. The New Families Survey 2003, Statistics Norway.

### 3.2. Statistical approach

We estimate continuous-time hazard models in which the logarithmic hazard (or instantaneous rate) of union dissolution is modeled as a piece-wise linear spline, a flexible parameterization that allows for any duration pattern in the risk of union dissolution. For the statistical analyses, a file was created with one record for each union. The pool of individuals who have formed a second union will contain a disproportionate number of “movers” (Halliday, 1980, p. 633), and even more so when they cohabit or have done so before (Smock and Manning, 2004). Standard models do not accommodate this selectivity that arises from unobserved heterogeneity, and will overestimate the risk of dissolution in second unions. We add a person-specific random effect to our models, assumed to be normally distributed and constant over time, which captures unobserved heterogeneity at the individual level. These models are also known as random effect or frailty models, and are robust to the kind of distribution chosen for the person-specific random effect (see Allison, 1995, pp. 243–246). Once this term is included in the model, selectivity is largely controlled for and purged from the estimates.

To examine whether first unions are more stable than second or higher-order unions, we estimate a model (Model A) that includes two dummy variables for having had one or more than one prior union experiences. As being in a first union represents the reference category, these dummy variables indicate the difference in dissolution risks between first unions on the one hand, and second and higher order unions on the other hand, whilst disregarding the type of those unions. However, we control for the type of the current union. The model is estimated with and without unobserved heterogeneity to accommodate that “movers” self-select into higher-order unions.

To assess how dissolution risks vary depending upon the type of prior and current union, that is people’s specific partnership trajectories, we estimate a model (Model B) that includes a categorical variable where the different categories represent combinations of the individual’s current union type and prior union experience. This model is only estimated whilst controlling for selection. It is useful to think of the combinations as a cross-table of two variables: current union type and prior union experience. Current union type can take only two values: currently cohabiting or currently



married. Prior union experience can take four values in our definition: no prior experience, one prior cohabiting union, one prior marital union experience, and two or more prior unions. The reason for not splitting up the latter category by type of previous experiences is that the logically possible trajectories are too many to be distinguished with the available data. Our focus will therefore be on comparing first and second marriages and cohabiting unions, but we do control for being in a higher order marriage or cohabiting union. The categories are therefore: (a) first cohabiting union (reference group), (b) first marriage, (c) second cohabiting union, previously cohabiting, (d) second cohabiting union, previously married, (e) second marriage, previously cohabiting, (f) second marriage, previously married, (g) third or higher order cohabiting union, and (h) third or higher order marriage. We do not split marriages up into direct marriages and marriages preceded by cohabitation; couples who eventually married at some point during their relationship are counted as married regardless of whether they had any spell of premarital cohabitation or not. As can be seen in Table 1, direct marriage is relatively rare, resulting in too few cases to get reliable results when distinguishing between marriages with and without premarital cohabitation.

For reasons of greater clarity and interpretability of the results, we use a graphical presentation of our results. These graphs show the predicted annual probabilities of union dissolution for first, second, and higher order unions (derived from model A), and for the various combinations as to the type of first and second unions (derived from model B), estimated at the sample means of the control variables in the model. Estimates for the complete models that underlie the graphs can be found in Table A1. In preliminary analyses, we tested whether the effects of partnership trajectories differed by gender. Because no gender differences were found, models are estimated for the full sample without making a distinction between men and women.

### 3.3. Measures

Our central independent variables refer to a person's partnership history and their precise measurements in different models have been discussed in the previous section. Some descriptive information about respondents' partnership histories can be found in Table 1. The analyses also control for the following set of control variables: union duration, period, age at entry of union, urban residence, parental divorce, educational attainment, income, and presence and age of children. Previous studies have shown that dissolution risks may be particularly high among the poorly educated and couples with a non-traditional division of paid labor, childless couples, those who enter a union at a young age, have divorced parents and less traditional persons, such as non-religious people and city dwellers (for Scandinavian evidence, see Hoem and Hoem, 1992; Lyngstad, 2006). These control variables are also related to probabilities of entering cohabitation rather than marriage; particularly non-traditional people and those with a higher education are more likely to enter cohabitation, although the effect of education has declined for younger cohorts (for Scandinavian evidence, see Blom, 1994). Note that religiosity is not included as a control. We lack retrospective information and using respondents' religiosity at the time of the survey is problematic, as its effect may be due to reversed causation; religiosity is likely to change



as a result of union dissolution (Stolzenberg et al., 1995). Descriptive information about the control variables is presented in Table A1.

*Duration* dependency is captured by a piece-wise linear spline function with three nodes at 2 and 8 years of union duration. *Period* effects are captured by a variable measuring current calendar year. *Age at entry into the union* is included in the model as a piece-wise linear spline function with nodes at ages 25 and 35. *Urban residence*, defined by living in one of Norway's six largest cities, is captured by a time-varying dummy variable. A dummy variable indicates whether the respondent experienced *parental divorce* before the age of 18. Respondent's *educational attainment* is measured by a time-varying continuous covariate. The value represents the number of years of schooling that are formally required for the level that the respondent has attained. We also control for whether people are still in school. *School enrollment* is captured by a dummy variable (coded 1 if currently enrolled), also time-varying. If respondents are currently enrolled, their scores on educational level indicate the level of the educational track they already have attained. *Income* effects on union dissolution rates are captured by taking the natural logarithm of annual labor income. Pensions, public transfers, or capital incomes are thus not included in this income definition. The sample, however, includes relatively young persons, who are less likely than the average person to have large transfers or capital stocks. As men's and women's income may affect divorce risk differently (e.g., Becker, 1981), we include an interaction effect between income and gender. We control for whether people *have an income*; people without labor income are assigned the gender-specific mean on income, and as a result the dummy for having no income represents the difference between those with no income and those with an average income. We use a time-varying categorical variable to capture effects of having *children* and the *age of the youngest child* on the hazard of dissolution; no children (reference group), youngest child under three years old and youngest child three years or older. We do not know the residential status of these children, but we know their date of birth so we can check whether they are born in the current union or not. As particularly respondents in higher order unions may have *children from previous relationships*, we also constructed a time-varying dummy variable that is set to one if the respondent is registered as a biological parent for any children born before the start of the current union minus 3 months.

#### 4. Results

We first address the question of whether the risk of union dissolution increases as people go from their first to their second and even higher order unions. Fig. 1 graphically presents the results derived from models including dummies capturing union order (i.e., being in a first, second or higher order union). The three bars to the left in Fig. 1 show predicted annual probabilities for persons who are in their first, second and third union, respectively, with no selection control, and the right bars show estimates with selection controlled for.

It is easily seen from the figure that second and higher unions have higher dissolution rates than first unions when selectivity is not controlled for, which corroborates earlier findings showing greater instability in second than first marriages. When selectivity is incorporated, however, there is no significant increase in dissolution risks for people in second unions. The effect for third and higher order unions is negative and

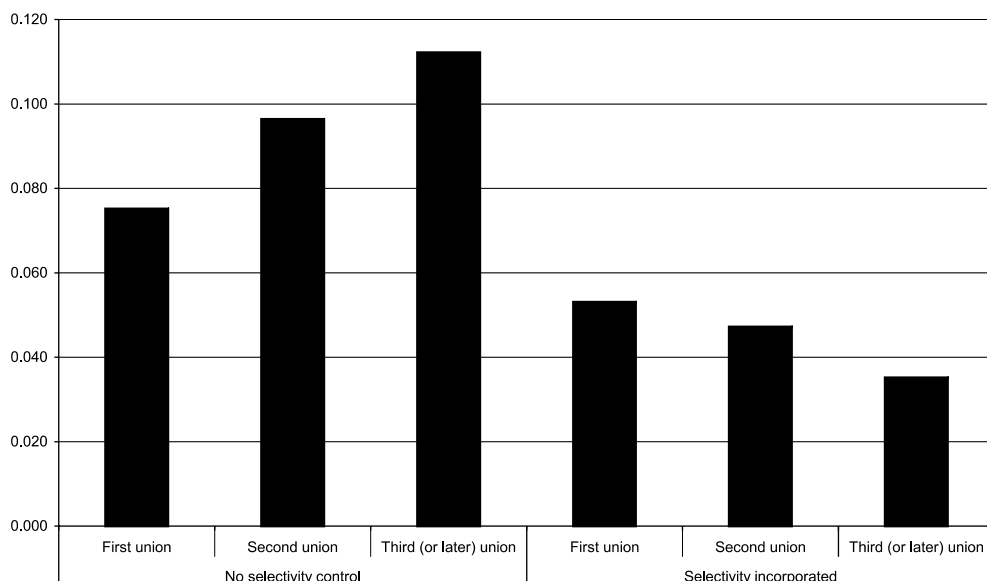


Fig. 1. Annual probabilities of dissolution of first and higher order unions from models with and without selectivity.

marginally significant, but we are cautious in drawing definite conclusions from this finding as the number of persons in a third or higher order union is small. These findings suggest that the excess risk of union dissolution for persons in their second unions can be fully explained by selection. No support is found for mechanisms that potentially would increase the risk of dissolution the second time around, such as greater complexity in higher order unions, poorer marriage market conditions, or learning effects.

The increase in the risk of dissolution when entering a second union may, however, be greater for the formerly married than for former cohabitants. Even though Fig. 1 suggests that there is no increase in dissolution risks, it may well be that dissolution risks are higher the second time around when focusing on the formerly married. In addition, the choice to marry in a second union is a signal of renewed commitment, and the increase in dissolution risks when entering a second union may therefore be smaller for those who choose to get married in their second union than for people choosing to cohabit. Hence, an increase in dissolution risks may be observed for those who enter a cohabiting union for the second time. Fig. 2 displays predicted annual probabilities of dissolution for all possible partnership trajectories. As explained, the probabilities are derived from a model that includes indicators for the various combinations as to the type of union for first and second unions, whilst controlling for selectivity. Contrary to the results displayed in Fig. 1, most contrasts remain significant after taking selectivity into account. Fig. 2 is divided into two panels. The left panel refers to those who are or were cohabiting in their first union and tracks former cohabitants in their second marriage or cohabiting union. Similarly, the right panel shows dissolution risks associated with the possible partnership trajectories for those who were married in their first union.

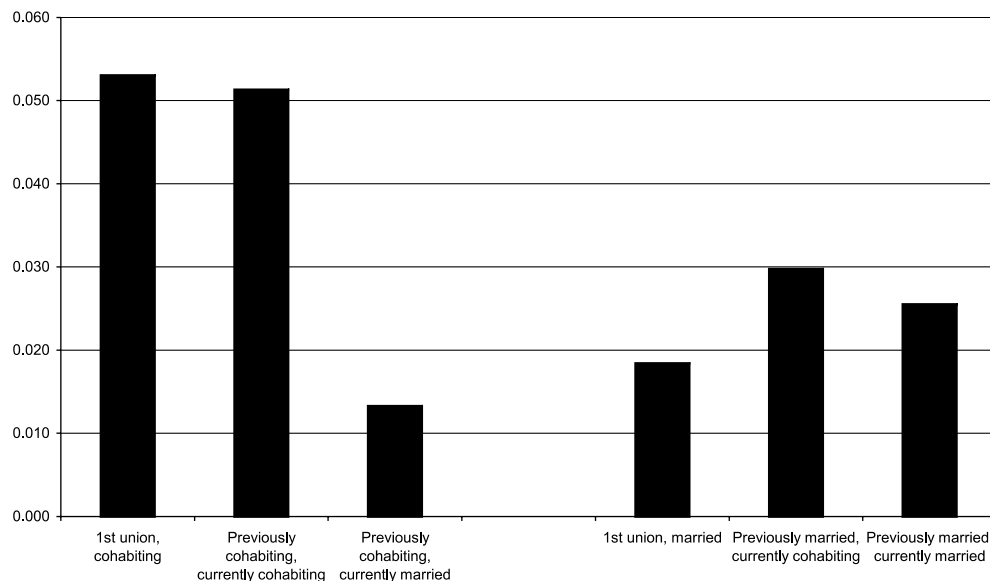


Fig. 2. Annual probabilities of dissolution for combinations of first and second union type, selectivity controlled for.

Although not central to our research interests here, it can firstly be seen that, in line with earlier findings, cohabiting unions are less stable than marital unions; the difference is most pronounced when looking at first unions but is also observed for second unions, particularly among former cohabitants. Although cohabitants start off with higher dissolution risks, the question is what happens to former cohabitants and formerly married people as they go on to enter a second marriage or cohabitation. From the left panel of Fig. 2, it can be seen that former cohabitants generally do not seem to do worse in their second union; former cohabitants who enter a second cohabiting union are equally likely to dissolve their union than cohabitants in their first unions. When former cohabitants marry the second time around, they are significantly less likely to separate (one-tailed  $p = 0.00$ ). In fact, former cohabitants who got married the second time have a risk that is lower than that of persons in their first marriage (one-tailed  $p = 0.04$ ).

This pattern contrasts strongly with the pattern found for the formerly married as shown in the right panel of Fig. 2. Formerly married persons generally do experience a higher risk of dissolution in their second union compared to first marriages. Dissolution risks are particularly high when the formerly married enter a cohabiting union the second time around; formerly married persons in a second cohabiting union have significantly higher dissolution risks than people in their first marriage (one-tailed  $p = 0.00$ ). Dissolution risks are also higher for second marriages compared to first marriages, but the difference is at the border of significance (one-tailed  $p = 0.06$ ).

These results suggest that the increase in dissolution risks when entering a second union depends, as expected, upon the type of prior union as the increase is more pronounced for the formerly married than for former cohabitants. In fact, no such increase is found for former cohabitants. The type of union chosen the second time matters as well, but its role

depends upon the type of prior union suggesting that prior union experiences interact with the type of second union chosen. For former cohabitants, we see that dissolution risks remain high for those who re-cohabit but are significantly reduced when former cohabitants marry, suggesting that entering marriage makes up for cohabitants' (continuing) high risk of dissolution. In contrast, getting married the second time around does not reduce the risk of dissolution among the formerly married. Whether people marry or cohabit after marital dissolution, their chances to dissolve this second union are equally high and higher than in their first marriage. This suggests that the formerly married cannot compensate for their increased dissolution risk when entering a second union by marrying rather than cohabiting.

## **5. Discussion**

In a time of increased diversity in individuals' partnership trajectories, the question of how disadvantages or advantages cumulate over the life course depending upon the pathways taken in life becomes increasingly relevant. Using methods incorporating selectivity on unmeasured characteristics and data on individuals' union histories from contemporary Norway, a country with wide variation in family forms, we have compared the instability of first and higher order marital and cohabiting unions. By tying together the two separate strands of research on dissolution of first versus second marriages and on differences between marriage and cohabitation, this study has yielded insights that are new to both lines of research.

Although second unions in general were not found to be less stable than first unions once selectivity was controlled for, distinct dynamic patterns in dissolution risks emerged when a distinction was made between marriage and cohabitation in first and second unions. People who cohabit in their first union start off with a much higher risk of dissolving this union than people who got married the first time, and former cohabitants continue to have a high dissolution risk when they enter a second cohabiting union. However, as soon as former cohabitants enter marriage in their second union they do even better than first married persons. In contrast, the formerly married experience higher dissolution risks in their second union compared to their first, regardless of whether they choose to cohabit or marry.

The results offer new and better answers to the question of whether disadvantages cumulate across the life course as people go on to have multiple relationships. Empirical studies within this line of research have so far only compared first marriages and remarriages and found the latter to be less stable. We have also included the expanding groups of former cohabitants. We found that only formerly married persons, not former cohabitants, experience an increased likelihood of union dissolution when they form a new union, be it marriage or cohabitation. Apparently, having been married is quite a different experience than unmarried cohabitation as only prior marital experiences negatively affect people's subsequent relationships. Getting married implies stronger commitment and greater investments into the relationship and the larger social network than cohabitation. The relationship "baggage" carried into the next relationship, such as more cautious attitudes or continuing ties to the former relationship, is therefore likely to be greater for formerly married persons, leading to relatively unstable second unions. Moreover, making such a commitment again by remarrying cannot compensate for these prior marital experiences. Former cohabitants

have little such relational baggage as their risk of union dissolution remains at the same level or decreases substantially in case they choose for greater commitment by marrying the second time around.

The other line of research has dealt with the question how cohabitation differs from marriage and particularly, whether cohabitants fare less well in life than married people. So far, empirical studies tracked the fate of cohabitants only to the extent that they marry their cohabiting partner and disregarded the stability of subsequent unions. Our results show that additional insight into the fate of cohabitants versus married people is gained when the increasingly complex partnership trajectories in contemporary societies are studied. In line with studies showing that premarital cohabitation is no longer associated with higher divorce risks (e.g., [Schoen, 1992](#)), cohabitants were found to compensate for their higher dissolution rates as soon as they choose greater commitment by entering marriage in their second union. When they do, the risk of union dissolution is quite similar to the risk faced by people who decide to marry in their first union. As most young Norwegians intend to marry at some point in their lives ([Lyngstad and Noack, 2005](#)), our findings suggest that cohabitants may eventually overcome the associated disadvantages and that rising cohabitation rates do not necessarily have to be seen as problematic when seen from a longer life course perspective.

This study pertained to young people in contemporary Norway, a country in which cohabitation is the predominant type of first union, and where there is strong acceptance of cohabitation as an alternative to formal marriage in the population. Our findings shed some light on the meaning of cohabitation and marriage for Norwegian young adults. As dissolution risks continue to be high for cohabitants whether they do so for the first or second time and drop substantially when they choose to marry in their second union, cohabitation seems to have become “a matter of temporary convenience” ([Bumpass and Lu, 2000, p. 33](#)), with few strings attached and hence, few negative implications for future relationships. Marriage seems to have kept at least some of its intrinsic and symbolic value as a means to affirm people’s commitment to the relationship; dissolution risks drop in case of marriage, and prior marital experiences do seem to have long lasting consequences for subsequent relationships.

The findings of this study suggest that it is important in studies of union dissolution to take the partnership history fully into account because important patterns in dissolution risks can remain hidden when different types of prior and current union experiences are ignored. Because cohabitation and marriage may have quite different meanings in different countries ([Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004](#)), it is likely that the pattern of union history specific dissolution risks varies across countries, and it is an important task for future research to replicate our study in other countries as well.

## **Acknowledgments**

This research was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO, 451-03-064) and the Research Council of Norway (Grant #159666/730). Data collection was financed by the Research Council of Norway Grant (#150237/530).

## Appendix A

Table A1. Descriptive statistics for control variables and effects of prior and current union experiences on log-hazard of dissolution

Variable	Descriptive statistics		Model A				Model B	
	Mean	SD	No selection control		Selection control		Selection control	
			B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept			−2.55***	0.26	−2.91***	0.28	−2.91***	0.29
Duration	8.32	6.75						
Up to 2 years			0.66***	0.05	0.77***	0.56	0.77***	0.06
2–8 years			−0.02	0.01	0.03*	0.02	0.04*	0.02
8+ years			−0.04***	0.01	−0.03*	0.01	−0.03*	0.01
Calendar year	1991.50	6.96	0.04***	0.00	0.04***	0.01	0.04***	0.01
Age at entry union	24.61	5.15						
Up to 25			−0.09***	0.01	−0.11***	0.01	−0.11***	0.01
25–35			−0.04***	0.01	−0.05**	0.01	−0.04***	0.01
35+			−0.10*	0.05	−0.11*	0.06	−0.10*	0.06
Living in city								
No	0.56							
Yes	0.44		0.18***	0.04	0.20***	0.05	0.20***	0.05
Parents divorced								
No	0.64							
Yes	0.36		0.30***	0.05	0.41***	0.06	0.40***	0.06
Educational attainment (years)	12.24	2.55	−0.02**	0.01	−0.02	0.01	−0.02*	0.01
School enrollment								
No	0.90							
Yes	0.10		0.15**	0.06	0.15*	0.06	0.15**	0.06
Annual income (log)								
Men's income	5.68	6.09	−0.05**	0.02	−0.05*	0.02	−0.06**	0.02
Has income	0.99							
Has no income	0.01		0.53***	0.16	0.59***	0.17	0.60***	0.17
Women's income	6.12	5.71	−0.05**	0.02	−0.05*	0.02	−0.05**	0.02
Has income	0.95							
Has no income	0.05		0.23**	0.09	0.20	0.10	0.20*	0.10
Children from this union								
None	0.41							
Yes, below 3 years	0.38		−0.68***	0.06	−0.74***	0.06	−0.74***	0.06

(continued on next page)

## Appendix A (continued)

Variable	Descriptive statistics		Model A				Model B	
	Mean	SD	No selection control		Selection control		Selection control	
			B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Yes, above 3 years	0.21		−0.05	0.09	−0.18	0.10	−0.18*	0.10
Children from earlier union								
<i>No</i>	0.89							
Yes	0.11		0.05	0.07	0.09	0.08	0.13	0.08
Current union type								
<i>Cohabiting</i>	0.45							
Married	0.55		−0.93***	0.06	−1.05***	0.06		
Union history								
<i>First union</i>	0.83							
Second union	0.14		0.26***	0.06	−0.12	0.10		
Third union	0.03		0.42***	0.12	−0.42*	0.19		
Partnership trajectories								
<i>Cohabiting in first union</i>	0.34							
Married in first union	0.49						−1.08***	0.07
Married in 2nd union, previously cohabited	0.04						−1.41***	0.19
Married in 2nd union, previously married	0.02						−0.75***	0.23
Cohabiting in 2nd, previously cohabited	0.06						−0.03	0.10
Cohabiting in 2nd, previously married	0.02						−0.59***	0.18
Married in 3rd union	0.01						−1.34***	0.34
Cohabiting in 3rd union	0.02						−0.47**	0.20
SD of heterogeneity term					0.83***	0.08	0.82***	0.09
Log likelihood			−15190.0		−15177.5		−15167.0	
Number of individuals			5294					

Note: reference groups in italics. Descriptive statistics for time-varying variables are calculated on the basis of person-time splits.

Source: The New Families Survey 2003, Statistics Norway.

\* One-tailed  $p < .10$ .

\*\* One-tailed  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\* One-tailed  $p < .01$ .



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